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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002120

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: STUDENTS AND ANTI-REFORM SECTORS PROTEST
REFERENDUM, CLASHES ENSUE

REF: CARACAS 002077

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Over 20,000 university student leaders and anti-reform protesters marched to the National Electoral Council's (CNE's) headquarters November 1 to petition the CNE to postpone the referendum until February 2008. After arriving at the CNE, some student delegates were refused access to a meeting with CNE rectors, while others were forcibly removed from the meeting after attempting to chain themselves to CNE installations. Meanwhile, security forces dispersed demonstrators with water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets, injuring some students. Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) officials referred to the students as "instigators," while students and staunch opposition groups called for more street actions to protest President Chavez' constitutional reform package. As anti-reform activities intensify, the potential for more violent clashes intensifies. End Summary.

Students Protest Upcoming Referendum

¶2. (SBU) Caracas university students and sectors opposed to President Chavez' constitutional reform package marched from the Central University in Venezuela's (UCV's) campus to the National Electoral Council's (CNE's) headquarters November 1. They petitioned the CNE to postpone the referendum until February 2008 in order to give voters more time to become familiar with the 69 proposed constitutional changes. (Note: The referendum is tentatively scheduled for December 2. End Note.) The march was convoked by Stalin Gonzalez, President of the Federation of National Universities and law student at the UCV, as a follow-up to the October 23 student-led march to the National Assembly (reftel). More than 20,000 persons participated in the march, making it somewhat larger than the October 23 march. Important opposition leaders, including Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez, also participated in the demonstration.

March Turns Sour

¶3. (SBU) Initially, the march to the CNE unfolded relatively smoothly and few disturbances were reported along the route.

The protesters departed from UCV's campus at midday and arrived at a pre-determined end point within a few blocks of CNE's headquarters less than two hours later. At that time, a delegation of approximately 12 student leaders, including Gonzalez and Yon Goicochea, walked an extra three blocks to the meet with CNE leaders. As the student delegation and the press entered the CNE building, pro-Chavez supporters, who were assembled in front of the building, could be seen on live video throwing bottles at them.

¶4. (SBU) Inside the CNE, chaos reigned. Security forces refused to allow approximately six students to enter and the press corps access to a meeting with CNE rectors. A scuffle ensued as students and reporters attempted to make their way to the meeting. Minutes later, security forces forcibly removed students from the meeting. According to one of the four CNE rectors that received the student leaders, an unknown number of students attempted to chain themselves to CNE furnishings. As a result, security forces proceeded to remove them. The same CNE rector conceded that some of the National Guard (GN) officers were "too rough" with the students. Tarek El Azzami, Vice Minister of Citizen Security, referred to the students who attempting to chain themselves as "guarimberos" or instigators, a term that appeared on the front page of the government daily "VEA" to describe the march participants.

¶5. (SBU) Outside, the environment changed quickly as well. Globovision showed footage of security forces disbursing demonstrators with water cannons, rubber bullets, and tear gas bombs. A small number of students threw rocks at the GN and Metropolitan Police. Security forces managed to pushed back the demonstrators and cleared the streets surrounding the CNE within a few minutes.

Media Coverage

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¶6. (SBU) As it has done in previous opposition student-led demonstrations, Globovision aired the march in its entirety, while government-owned media outlets shied away from covering it. Government-affiliated VTV began covering the event as student leaders were escorted out of the CNE building and subsequently showed coverage of the disturbances taking place in the streets. Not surprisingly, Globovision and VTV showed opposing images of the events taking place outside the CNE. For example, Globovision showed footage of security forces launching tear gas bombs, while VTV focused its reporting on a small groups of students throwing objects at GN officers.

More Marches Expected

¶7. (SBU) In the coming days more anti-reform marches are expected to take place in Caracas. Opposition parties Brave Alliance (Alianza Bravo Pueblo), Red Banner (Bandera Roja), and the National Resistance Movement (CNR), along with Accion Democratica (AD) plan to convoke a march November 3, while student leaders announced a march for November 11. President Chavez plans to lead a mass rally in Caracas November 4 to mobilize support for his constitutional changes.

Comment

¶8. (C) Political polarization is intensifying as the formal 30-day campaign period leading up to the Constitutional referendum begins. In addition to attacks on demonstrators, Defense Intelligence (DIM) and National Intelligence Police (DISIP) officials allegedly roughed up opposition party leaders from Primero Justicia during the early morning hours

November 1 as they held a vigil outside of the Supreme Court.

Embassy is preparing a public announcement to Amcits reminding them to steer clear of political demonstrations, especially during the referendum campaign.

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